EXPERIENCE-LISTEN-FOLLOW
February 25, 2001

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and, in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts
And rolls through all things.

William Wordsworth
Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Exodus 34: 29-35 (NRSV)
Luke 9: 28-36 (NRSV)

"When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." (Luke 9:36)

Dear God, we are here to be with you, to know you, to hear your word for us, to learn your will. So come to us. Startle us with your truth and give us faith to follow where you lead: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There are experiences that change everything. Ollie Dixon is a minister on the west side. Before she was a minister she was a police officer, a Chicago cop assigned to the Englewood district. Englewood, which has 260 churches and at least as many liquor stores, led the nation in homicides in 1990. Every day, it seemed, officer Ollie Dixon was called to the site of a murder, almost always drug related. "Every day me leaning over a young black body lying on the sidewalk; everyday seeing mothers weeping over their dying sons," is the way she puts it. And then it came close. Her young nephew, father of a new born baby, unemployed, selling drugs to feed his wife and child, was killed. Her 15 year old niece, who tried to break up with her boyfriend, a gang member, was shot in the back in a jealous rage.

One day Ollie Dixon had enough, had too much, and she prayed "Lord, there must be something we can do." And she exchanged her police uniform for a clerical collar.

There are life changing experiences, experiences that forever alter the way we see ourselves, our lives, our purpose, our destiny. Sometimes they happen on a mountain top with a gorgeous sun rising and the air clear and clean, and sometimes they happen in the darkest valley in the midst of despair and meaninglessness. Sometimes everything changes when we hear, as for the first time, the perfection of a Bach fugue, and sometimes life changes when we sit by the bedside of a parent, a friend, holding her hand, as life slips away.

What those experiences have in common, wherever and whenever they happen, is that they take us out of ourselves for a brief moment and remind us of a dimension of life that is beyond the every day, beyond our senses of touch and sight and hearing. What those experiences have in common, whether it is watching a young boy die or an infant be born, is that they remind us of the mystery, the transcendent, what theologian Rudolph Otto called the "Mysterium Tremendum" behind all of life.

One time Moses takes time off from leading the children of Israel through the wilderness, and walks up a mountain to meet God. But when he gets there, a cloud descends and Moses sits in the cloud for a week and God speaks to him and when he comes down, he's a changed man. His face is shining and the people are so terrified he has to wear a veil.

One time Jesus takes his closest friends, Peter, James and John, on an afternoon walk up a mountain. On the mountain something happens that defies description—his clothing became dazzling white, his faces changes, Moses and Elijah appear and talk to him about his death. A cloud descends and the three friends are terrified. They hear a voice: "This is my son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

It was such an experience that they never even tried to tell anyone about it who wasn't there.

Those strange stories that make us uncomfortable every time we hear them are in the Bible to remind us of the basic faith affirmation that there is more to reality than we can see, touch or imagine. They are reminders of that basic Biblical truth, that genius of Hebrew religion, that there is a God who is not one of us, a God who is "holy"—which means "other," a God whose "otherness" stands over against our humanness. Those stories are reminders that there is a "Thou" who is not me; that we are not alone in the universe, but somehow intended by, created by, known by, loved by, pursued by, an "other" whom we call God.

Those mysterious stories are in the Bible to warn us against assuming too much about God, assuming we can understand everything there is to understand about God, for instance, assuming that God is limited by the boundaries of our understanding.

I'm not sure many of us fully understand what the scientists are up to on the Human Genome project, but it has something to do with discovering and unlocking the genetic code that is responsible for who we are as human beings and as individuals. What I do know is that it makes people who already know how we got here and how long it took for us to get here, very nervous. And so I was fascinated to learn that in this project, as is consistently the case with research science, the more secrets are unlocked the more humble and almost reverent the scientists become. Not only isn't it the end of the religious interpretation of the origins and meaning of life, it sounds almost like the scientists are theologians—who have been up there on the mountain with Moses, or in the cloud with Peter, James and John.

An article in the *Tribune* last week caught my eye: "God, Free Will and the Genome." The article explained that stunning discoveries announced last week—that we are genetically closely related to every living thing on earth, that our genes contain relics of our evolution going back at least 800 million years—are fascinating scientists.

And then the article reported on how the two scientists who are heading up the project have begun to reflect on it. Dr. Francis Collins, Director of the National Human Genome

Research Institute, a scientist's scientist, sees God in the project. Collins likes to refer to the genetic code as something far grander than the chemical subunits that spell out our genetic instructions. It is more like the "language of God," he insists. (*The Chicago Tribune,* 2/18/01)

And I was reminded of that wonderful book and its memorable title, *Your God is Too Small,"* by the late J. B. Phillips, a British theologian and New Testament scholar. Phillips observed, "Many men and women today are living, often without any faith in God at all. . . . not because they are wicked or selfish or godless, but because they have not found with their adult minds a God big enough to 'fit in with' the new science . . . ." (*Your God is Too Small,* p.8)

Your God is too small, Phillips said, and every time I read that mysterious incident of transfiguration—of Jesus on the mountain with his friends, experiencing something beyond their ability to describe—beyond their ability to comprehend—I remind myself that my own intellect, the intellect of the smartest of us, does not set ultimate limits.

They never spoke of it again. Luke tells us, "they kept silent and told no one what they had seen."

The point, I take it, is not to give them bragging rights on their personal familiarity with the Almighty. The point is not to talk about and try to explain and share our deepest religious experiences. That's not what they are for. God gives us occasional experiences of transcendence, I believe, to get our attention, and then, to change us. The real question is not about the experience—what really happened? Was it authentic? The real question is what will we do and who will we become when we come down from the mountain.

I love Peter. Peter tries to manage everything, keep everything under control. Peter sounds like a good team member, a "go-to" person. After the mysterious experience on the mountain, Peter says, "let's build.' Let's memorialize the moment, let's honor forever what happened up here. Let's make permanent and accessible the revelation we have experienced. Let's build three booths. And did you notice that Jesus doesn't even acknowledge the suggestion? Instead Jesus leads them down from the mountaintop to the valley where there are people waiting, where life is, where there is a dreadfully sick boy and his desperate father. And I think in the silence of their descent, stumbling along behind him, the three of them understood what the experience was for them. For them the curtain was drawn momentarily, but their task henceforth was not to keep talking about what happened up there on the mountain and how wonderful it was and maybe we should write a creed that gets everybody to share, at least verbally, in the truth we have experienced, and three little shrines to mark the spot to which others can travel for their own transfiguration pilgrimage. No, they said nothing, wisely. 'Listen to him," the voice said. Listen to what he says. Watch what he does. Listen and watch as he walks down from the mountain into the valley of human need and there confronts humanity at its most human, in the form of a sick child and a desperate parent. Listen and watch as he

describes and then lives out a whole new way to be human and to be faithful, the way of selfless love.

Listen as he says—whoever welcomes this child welcomes me.

Listen as he tells about an outcast who stops by the roadside to bind up the wounds of his enemy and about a father who runs down the road and opens his arms to welcome his son home.

Listen as he says—"love your enemy—love one another."

Listen as he says—"forgive them for they know not what they do."

Listen and watch as he gives his life away for others.

Listen as he says—"Do not be afraid little flock" and "Today you will be with me in paradise." And "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Listen as he says—the one who saves life will lose it and the one who loses life for my sake will find it.

I do believe that God comes to us in experiences we cannot always understand and can rarely explain to others. I believe God gives us occasional moments of clarity, or tantalizing moments of near clarity. I do not believe they are the same for all of us. I do not believe it is particularly important to talk about them and try to share with others. I do not believe they happen often. I do not believe God wants us to keep returning to the mountain, to build a memorial. I believe that what God wants of us is to know deeply in our souls that we are not alone, that there is a reality bigger than our reality and that in that reality we will find the meaning and purpose of our lives.
I believe God wants us to listen to God's son, and to follow him, to follow him down from the mountain, to life, our own ordinary lives, and there, as carpenters and cooks, as clerks and nurses, traders and attorneys, physicians and executives, husbands and wives, partners and parents, men and women, to live as his people, to love without reservation, to give our lives away.

Officer Ollie Dixon watched as poverty and drugs and guns combined to take the lives of young men and women in her neighborhood. Weary of looking at young bodies every day and weeping mothers, she prayed one day. "Lord, there must be something we can do." And she had an epiphany, a moment of transfiguration, an experience on the mountain.

"We have all these churches," she reasoned, "right here in Englewood. 260 of them, all locked up tight to protect themselves from the hoodlums and gang bangers and drug dealers." "Open your doors," she said, and says to the churches. "Open your doors and let the community in. Let the children come. Open your doors and come out and walk the

city streets." And it is more than her efforts, of course but there is less violence and fewer homicides in Englewood and there is something new. There is hope.

The mandate is clear, I think. For the church, and for us as individuals, the mountaintop may be here, as we experience together God's goodness and presence in beautiful music, soaring architecture, well reasoned discourse. And for the church, here and everywhere, and for each one of us, as Ollie Dixon realized, the call is to follow the Lord down from the mountain into the valley of human need.

And so for you and me, moments of clarity and inspiration and deeply felt spiritual experience. And then, following him, back to the life we are given to live, there finding meaning and purpose and hope and salvation.

This is my son . . . listen to him.
Amen.

Prayers of the People
February 25, 2001
By John Wilkinson, Executive Associate Pastor

All beautiful the march of days, gracious God, when seasons come and go, and so we lift our hearts in thanksgiving for rains that fall from the sky and strong winds that remind us ever again of your majesty and imagination and creative power. We thank you for all good gifts received as blessings according to your providence: for the earth our home, for evidences of your love in the faces of those who love us, for gestures grand and small of grace and hope and joy. And we would beseech you, loving God, to allow us to be stewards of such love and creativity in our vocations and in the living of our days.

In the light of your love, we would pray for the world and gather our dreams around your dream of peace—peace in Africa, peace in the Middle East, peace in Northern Ireland, peace in the streets of this country and this great city. We pray for all those everywhere for whom the tyrant's power brings oppression and hardship, and we would claim once again the name of the Prince of Peace, that justice might flow like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We pray for children everywhere—for their health and happiness and safety—and in special and particular ways for children at risk. We pray for enough food in their bellies, enough resources for their learning, enough toys for their playing, enough love for their living. We pray for teachers and parents and all those whose task it is to tend to this most precious gift. We pray for all those facing illness this day of body and mind and spirit, for those facing addiction, for those facing cancer, for those facing depression, for those facing HIV/AIDS, for those facing a troubled relationship, for those facing a crisis in career, for those facing doubt. Help us to reach out with the healing touch of the great physician, whose ministry it is to meet us in our hurting places and whose own journey enables us to journey in strength and wholeness. We pray for your church, the church of Christ in every age and the church of Christ in this moment. We pray for the body of Christ scattered around the world, reflecting every hue, every perspective, every tradition, and we pray that from such wondrous diversity you might continue to build a church of integrity and hospitality and boldness, a church that worships rightly and serves courageously and teaches creatively and gathers extravagantly. We pray for all those who labor in the church, elsewhere and for this congregation, that their labors may be thank offerings to you.

May all our work be praise, gracious God, as you grant us wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour and the facing of every new day. As we prepare to commemorate once again your Son's journey to Jerusalem, help us to journey one with another and with you, living each moment as a gift and loving each stranger with your fierce love. For in the name of that great shepherd we pray, saying together the prayer we learned as children, Our Father . . .